

NEWSRELEASE

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With Photos: Bat Houses.jpg; Lodge.jpg

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Corrections officials tackle bat problem in historic building

The problem was driving Montana corrections officials, well, a little batty.

For more than a quarter of a century, Conley Lake Lodge has been infested with bats. Lots of little brown bats.

Over the years, the flying mammals made a home of the 1,865-square-foot log building that is located west of Montana State Prison. Built by Frank Conley, warden from 1890 until 1921, the building was originally called the “recreation hall” and is located just a few dozen feet from the once-lavish house Conley occupied when he was one of the most powerful political figures in the state. The lodge is dominated by a large meeting room and has been used frequently for corrections-related meetings and gatherings of local civic groups.

But all those bats left plenty of calling cards. The floor and other surfaces in the building were constantly covered with a carpet of bat guano. That’s bat droppings. Lots of bat droppings.

Gayle Lambert, administrator of Montana Correctional Enterprises, said the problem had been tolerated for years. The lodge would be cleaned before each use, only to have the bats layer it again with their guano. “It was never dealt with in the past,” she said.

Lambert’s division was charged with taking action. Officials consulted the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Kristi DuBois, native species coordinator for the fish and game agency, visited the site and concluded the lodge had become home to a “maternity colony” of perhaps as many as 1,000 bats. Essentially, it was a nursery where the bats migrated each spring to give birth to more little bats.

And the problem, DuBois warned, wasn’t going away. “Little brown bats can live up to 30 years old in the wild and the females usually try to come back to the same places each year to raise their young,” she said.

She said evicting the bats from the building could take two years or more because of their strong migratory nature. Sealing off the building only will prompt the colony to look for an alternative site, perhaps in other buildings nearby, she said.

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DuBois recommended against trying to kill the bats because they are difficult to exterminate, and sick bats could infect people and pets through bites. Besides, she said, bats perform an important service in controlling insects such as mosquitoes and agricultural pests.

Lambert said she feared that keeping bats out of the lodge merely would export the problem to the 3,700-square-foot Conley Lake house or other nearby structures.

“The only way to move bats out is to create alternative residences,” she said.

The answer, they found, was bat houses – “apartments” and “condominiums” designed to attract bats and draw them away from undesirable locations. Officials found designs and criteria for bat houses published by an organization called Bat Conservation International (BCI). Size, type and texture of wood, and location are critical to successfully establishing a new residential neighborhood for bats, officials learned.

Members of the inmate fire crew went to work cleaning the lodge, closing off bat-sized entries and preparing the new roosting homes for the bats’ expected migratory return from their winter hibernation. The crew created and installed five houses, flats and condos.

The strategy should work, according to BCI. The organization said bat houses work about 60 percent of the time in rural areas and 90 percent of such structures are occupied within two years of being placed.

“Time will tell whether the returning bats approve of their new digs,” Lambert said. “We’ll give them two years to get accustomed to the new houses and then move them farther away.”

The alternative of doing nothing was not acceptable, she said. “That rec hall was built in the early 1900s and has historic value to the city of Deer Lodge and the state of Montana. I don’t want to see it destroyed because it has a bat problem.”

The little brown bat is a small mammal with a body length of 3-3½ inches and weighing approximately one-eighth to half of an ounce. The wingspan ranges from six to eight inches.

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